

4 Standout College Application Essays on Work, Money and Class The New York Times

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Image



Columbia University, which Zöe Sottile plans to attend this year. Credit Universal Images Group, via Getty Images

Each year, we issue an open casting call for high school seniors who have dared [to address money, work or social class in their college application essays](#). From the large pile that arrived this spring, these four — about parents, small business, landscapes and the meaning a single object can convey — stood out. The fifth essay in our package appeared on The New York Times's new Snapchat Discover, and you can [view it at this link](#) by pressing the arrow/play button.

BLAINE, MINN.

Jonathan Ababiy

Image



Mr. Ababiy, a student at Blaine High School, plans to attend the University of Minnesota. Credit: Matthew Hintz for The New York Times

‘The professors’ home was a telescope to how the other (more affluent) half lived’

At age 6, I remember the light filled openness of the house, how the whirl of my mother’s vacuum floated from room to room. At 9, I remember how I used to lounge on the couch and watch Disney cartoons on the sideways refrigerator of a TV implanted in a small cave in the wall. At 12, I remember family photographs of the Spanish countryside hanging in every room. At 14, I remember vacuuming each foot of carpet in the massive house and folding pastel shirts fresh out of the dryer.

I loved the house. I loved the way the windows soaked the house with light, a sort of bleach against any gloom. I loved how I could always find a book or magazine on any flat surface.

But the vacuum my mother used wasn’t ours. We never paid for cable. The photographs weren’t of my family. The carpet I vacuumed I only saw once a week, and the pastel shirts I

folded I never wore. The house wasn't mine. My mother was only the cleaning lady, and I helped.

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My mother and father had come as refugees almost twenty years ago from the country of Moldova. My mother worked numerous odd jobs, but once I was born she decided she needed to do something different. She put an ad in the paper advertising house cleaning, and a couple, both professors, answered. They became her first client, and their house became the bedrock of our sustenance. Economic recessions came and went, but my mother returned every Monday, Friday and occasional Sunday.

She spends her days in teal latex gloves, guiding a blue Hoover vacuum over what seems like miles of carpet. All the mirrors she's cleaned could probably stack up to be a minor Philip Johnson skyscraper. This isn't new for her. The vacuums and the gloves might be, but the work isn't. In Moldova, her family grew gherkins and tomatoes. She spent countless hours kneeling in the dirt, growing her vegetables with the care that professors advise their protégés, with kindness and proactivity. Today, the fruits of her labor have been replaced with the suction of her vacuum.

The professors' home was a telescope to how the other (more affluent) half lived. They were rarely ever home, so I saw their remnants: the lightly crinkled New York Times sprawled on the kitchen table, the overturned, half-opened books in their overflowing personal library, the TV consistently left on the National Geographic channel. I took these remnants as a celebrity-endorsed path to prosperity. I began to check out books from the school library and started reading the news religiously.

Their home was a sanctuary for my dreams. It was there I, as a glasses-wearing computer nerd, read about a mythical place called Silicon Valley in Bloomberg Businessweek magazines. It was there, as a son of immigrants, that I read about a young senator named Barack Obama, the child of an immigrant, aspiring to be the president of the United States. The life that I saw through their home showed me that an immigrant could succeed in America, too. Work could be done with one's hands and with one's mind. It impressed on me a sort of social capital that I knew could be used in America. The professors left me the elements to their own success, and all my life I've been trying to make my own reaction.

Ultimately, the suction of the vacuum is what sustains my family. The squeal of her vacuum reminds me why I have the opportunity to drive my squealing car to school. I am where I am today because my mom put an enormous amount of labor into the formula of the American Dream. It's her blue Hoover vacuums that hold up the framework of my life. Someday, I hope my diploma can hold up the framework of hers.

TUCSON

Caitlin McCormick

Image



Ms. McCormick, a student at the Gregory School, plans to attend Barnard College. Credit Laura Segall for The New York Times

‘Slowly, my mother’s gingham apron began to look more like metal armor.’

When it comes to service workers, as a society we completely disregard the manners instilled in us as toddlers.

For seventeen years, I have awoken to those workers, to clinking silverware rolled in cloth and porcelain plates removed from the oven in preparation for breakfast service. I memorized the geometry of place mats slid on metal trays, coffee cups turned downward, dirtied cloth napkins disposed on dining tables.

I knew never to wear pajamas outside in the public courtyard, and years of shushing from my mother informed me not to speak loudly in front of a guest room window. I grew up in the swaddled cacophony of morning chatter between tourists, professors, and videographers. I grew up conditioned in excessive politeness, fitted for making small talk with strangers.

I grew up in [a bed and breakfast](#), in the sticky thickness of the hospitality industry. And for a very long time I hated it.

I was late to my own fifth birthday party in the park because a guest arrived five hours late without apology. Following a weeklong stay in which someone specially requested her room be cleaned twice a day, not once did she leave a tip for housekeeping. Small-business scammers came for a stop at the inn several times. Guests stained sheets, clogged toilets, locked themselves out of their rooms, and then demanded a discount.

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There exists between service workers and their customers an inherent imbalance of power: We meet sneers with apologies. At the end of their meal, or stay, or drink, we let patrons determine how much effort their server put into their job.

For most of my life I believed my parents were intense masochists for devoting their existences to the least thankful business I know: the very business that taught me how to discern imbalances of power. Soon I recognized this stem of injustice in all sorts of everyday interactions. I came to understand how latent racism, sexism, classism and ableism structure our society — how tipping was only a synonym for “microaggression.”

I became passionate. Sometimes enraged. I stumbled upon nonprofits, foundations, and political campaigns. I canvassed for Senate candidates, phone-banked for grass-roots action groups, served as a board member for the Women’s Foundation of Southern Arizona, reviewed grant applications for nonprofits and organized events for the nearby children’s hospital.

I devoted my time to the raw grit of helping people, and in the process I fell irrevocably in love with a new type of service: public service. At the same time, I worked midnight Black Friday retail shifts and scraped vomit off linoleum. When I brought home my first W-2, I had never seen my parents so proud.

The truth, I recently learned, was that not all service is created equal. Seeing guests scream at my parents over a late airport taxi still sickens me even as I spend hours a week as a volunteer. But I was taught all work is noble, especially the work we do for others. Slowly, my mother’s gingham apron began to look more like metal armor. I learned how to worship my parents’ gift for attentive listening, easily hearing the things guests were incapable of asking for — not sugar with their tea, but somebody to talk with while they waited for a

conference call. I envied their ability to wear the role of self-assured host like a second skin, capable of tolerating any type of cruelty with a smile.

Most of all, I admired my parents' continuous trust in humanity to not abuse their help. I realized that learning to serve people looks a lot like learning to trust them.

ANDOVER, MASS.

Zöe Sottile

Image



Ms. Sottile, a student at Phillips Academy, plans to attend Columbia University. Credit Tony Luong for The New York Times

'My Dell hid my privilege and my Mac hid my financial need'

The most exciting part was the laptop.

My mom grabbed the thick envelope out of my hands and read off the amenities associated with the Tang Scholarship to Phillips Academy: full tuition for all four years, a free summer trip, \$20 a week for me to spend on all the Cheetos and nail polish my heart desired, and finally, a free laptop.

I had never had a computer of my own before, and to me the prospect symbolized a world of new possibilities. I was the only student from my public middle school I knew to ever go to an elite boarding school, and it felt like being invited into a selective club. My first week at Andover, dazed by its glamour and newness, I fought my way to the financial aid office to pick up the laptop; I sent my mom a photo of me grinning and clutching the cardboard box. Back in my dorm room, I pulled out my prize, a heavy but functional Dell, and marveled at its sleek edges, its astonishing speed.

But the love story of my laptop came clamoring to a halt. In the library, as I stumbled to negotiate a space to fit in, I watched my friends each pull out a MacBook. Each was paper-thin and seemingly weightless. And mine, heavy enough to hurt my back and constantly sighing like a tired dog, was distinctly out of place. My laptop, which I had thought was my ticket to the elite world of Andover, actually gave me away as the outsider I was.

For a long time, this was the crux of my Andover experience: always an outsider. When I hung out with wealthier friends, I was disoriented by how different their lives were from mine. While they spent summers in Prague or Paris, I spent mine mining the constellation of thrift stores around New Haven. The gap between full-scholarship and full-pay felt insurmountable.

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But I also felt like an outsider going to meetings for the full-scholarship affinity group. My parents attended college and grew up wealthier than I did, giving me cultural capital many of my full-scholarship friends never had access to. Moreover, I'm white and could afford occasional concert tickets or sparkly earrings. The laptop, carried by all full-scholarship students and coded with hidden meanings, pivoted my friends' understandings of me. At home, I grew up middle class, then became the privileged prep school girl. But at Andover, suddenly, I was poor. Trying to reconcile these conflicting identities, I realized how complex and mutable class is. My class is connected to my parents' income, but it's also rooted in cultural knowledge and objects that are charged with greater meaning.

Which brings me back to the laptop: in the middle of my senior fall, my exhausted Dell broke and I couldn't afford another. When I managed to borrow a slim Mac from my school, I felt the walls around me reorient. I hoped that now I wouldn't have to think about the electric web of privilege and power every time I sent an email. Instead, I felt a new anxiety: I worried when I sat in the magnificent dining hall with my beautiful computer that I had lost an important part of my identity.

When I started at Andover, these constant dueling tensions felt like a trap: like I would never be comfortable anywhere. (The school sensed it too, and all full-financial aid students now receive MacBooks.) But maybe it's the opposite of a trap. Maybe I'm culturally ambidextrous, as comfortable introducing a speaker on the stage of Andover's century-old chapel as getting my nose pierced in a tattoo parlor in New Haven. My hyperawareness of how my Dell hid my privilege and how my Mac hid my financial need pushed me to be aware of what complicated stories were hiding behind my classmates' seemingly simple facades. I am a full-scholarship student who benefits from cultural, socioeconomic and racial privilege: my story isn't easy, but it's still mine.

FLAGSTAFF, ARIZ.

Tillena Trebon

Image



Ms. Trebon, a student at Northland Preparatory Academy, plans to attend the University of Oregon. Credit Laura Segall for The New York Times

'On one side of me, nature is a hobby. On the other, it is a way of life.'

I live on the edge.

I live at the place where trees curl into bushes to escape the wind. My home is the slippery place between the suburbs and stone houses and hogans.

I see the evolution of the telephone poles as I leave the reservation, having traveled with my mom for her work. The telephone poles on the reservation are crooked and tilted with wire clumsily strung between them. As I enter Flagstaff, my home, the poles begin to stand up straight. On one side of me, nature is a hobby. On the other, it is a way of life.

I live between a suburban land of plenty and a rural land of scarcity, where endless skies and pallid grass merge with apartment complexes and outdoor malls.

I balance on the edge of drought.

In the summers, when the rain doesn't come, my father's truck kicks dust into the air. A layer of earthy powder settles over the wildflowers and the grass. The stale ground sparks ferocious wildfires. Smoke soars into the air like a flare from a boat lost at sea. Everyone prays for rain. We fear that each drop of water is the last. We fear an invasion of the desert that stretches around Phoenix. We fear a heat that shrivels the trees, turns them to cactuses.

I exist at the epicenter of political discourse. Fierce liberalism swells against staunch conservatism in the hallways of my high school and on the streets of the downtown.

When the air is warm, the shops and restaurants open their doors. Professionals in suits mingle with musicians and artists sporting dreadlocks and ripped jeans. Together, they lament the drought, marvel at the brevity of the ski season.

I live on the edge of an urban and rural existence.

At my mother's house, we ride bikes down paved streets. We play catch with the neighbor kids. We wage war with water guns.

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At my father's house, we haul water. We feed the horses and chickens. We chase the fox away from the chicken coop. We watch deer grazing, not ten yards away. We turn the soil in the garden. When the rain and the soil and the sun and the plants give birth to fruit, we eat it straight from the vines.

Traditional Navajo weaving and prints of Picasso's paintings adorn the walls of both homes.

I straddle the innocence of my youth and the mystery of my adult life. That, too, is a precipice. I know I must leap into adulthood and leave the balancing act of Flagstaff life behind. Still, I belong at the place where opposites merge in a lumpy heap of beautiful contradictions. I crave the experiences only found at the edge. As I dive into adulthood, into college, I hope that I can find a new place that fosters diversity in all its forms, a new edge upon which I can learn to balance.